

Paul Figel - A Man of Unbounded Generosity

by Joyce Tepley

An early riser, Paul hits the floor running each morning and doesn't stop until bedtime. His days are filled helping others, working through his wife, Geenie's "honey do" list, taking courses at the community college, always learning and being grateful for his many blessings. When you're around Paul his optimism and liveliness are palpable.

Both he and Gennie coming from large families know the importance of cooperation and the value of contributing to a greater good. They see a need – they do their best to help. A neighbor whose husband had recently died talked with tears in her eyes about how she can count on Paul and Gennie to help her through this rough period. She doesn't feel so alone in her grief.

Born seventy-five years ago in Illinois, Paul was "fourth from the bottom" of eleven children. Three siblings are still alive along with fifty-five nephews and nieces. Getting a good education was important in his family, but it took Paul a little longer than some of his siblings to get his college degree.

"It only took sixteen years and five universities to get my degree," he joked. That's another endearing quality of Paul – his sense of humor.

He followed his brother to Notre Dame, his first university, in 1951 when he was seventeen, but left after a year to work as a draftsman. In 1952 he started what became his thirty-seven year career with the Ford Motor Company. "I enjoyed my job so much."

Being a regional sales manager traveling forty-five weeks out of most years and being transferred to different cities every few years while raising a family of six children was a challenge to completing his degree, but he was determined. Also, wherever they lived Paul would get involved with a volunteer organization. He belonged to the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Knights of Columbus. What he enjoyed most about the Jaycees was being Director of the selection committee for the Miss Davenport contest when they lived in Iowa. His last memory of the Knights was cooking hamburgers for a mob of people when he didn't know how to cook.

Paul's passion, however, is for flying. He started at age sixteen taking his first lesson in a Piper Cub, and by the time he was nineteen he owned his own airplane, a Luscombe.

“It was all metal, single engine, did loops and spins like those rides at Six Flags. One time the engine cut out and I had to land at night in a corn field. That’s no fun, I’ll tell you.”

At Notre Dame he was in the Air Force ROTC and continued in the Navy Active Air Reserves for eight years flying twin engine anti-submarine aircraft. The Korean War was winding down and Vietnam was beginning to heat up. He was honorably discharged in 1960.

Paul likes to tell the story of how he and Gennie’s relationship started in an airplane ride. She was working as a Secretary for Ford Motor so they knew each other in passing. He was in love with a woman who “dumped me.” Sometime after his heart was broken he invited Gennie for a ride in his airplane.

“Several guys in my department who were ex-air corps and Navy pilots warned Gennie to be careful about me once I got her up in the plane. They told her if she didn’t do what I might ask of her, I would push her out of the airplane.”

Apparently she believed them, because she brought a long hat pin and concealed it. The plane was a two-seater flown by a stick in each place. It was five below zero once they were up so they had a blanket over themselves. When Paul pulled back on his stick the other stick followed suit and Gennie thought the worst.

“I’m still trying to pull that pin out of my side.”

Cupid’s arrow also hit its mark and he and Gennie each saved up a year’s salary to pay for their wedding inviting four hundred guests. He was twenty-two and she was twenty-one. The year was 1956.

It was in 1966 that Ford sent Paul to Dallas. They lived in a five bedroom house in Chapel Downs that they purchased for \$28,000. After a few years it was back to Detroit, then in 1971 back to Dallas. By this time they had six children.

Why this particular neighborhood? “Because Charlie Lohr lived here.” Paul’s brother who roomed with Charlie at Notre Dame suggested that Paul and Gennie contact Charlie to help them find a house. The newly-built house on Fieldfare Court, about a block from Charlie’s, was ideal. It was big enough for eight, within walking distance of St. Monica’s Catholic School, and close enough to Jesuit and Ursuline Academies where their children attended.

Now their oldest, a daughter, is fifty-two and their youngest is thirty-nine. He is quite proud of his children's educations. His third oldest living in Boston just achieved her college degree. "She told me, 'I did it for you, Dad.'" It took her thirteen years of night school.

In 1988 Ford was going to lay him off so he took an early retirement. He was fifty-four years old. He thought he could find another job but it wasn't so easy. The next three years he was able to work at two different jobs handling industrial products like motors and engines. Then it was time to fully retire.

Retirement for Paul did not mean inactivity. Retirement meant more time to keep up with their thirteen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He still water skies, though he doesn't have his own boat anymore, and he still has his pilot license, though he doesn't own a plane anymore. He is contented with collecting model airplanes (which are actually banks) and running his private model railroad in his home. He brags about Gennie's artistic ability, having taught ceramics, oil painting, and quilting at the Josey Recreation Center for thirty years. She has quite a collection of her ceramics in the Lladro Style.

Giving back to the community that has nurtured him and his family seemed the right thing to do when in 1996 neighbors, Carroll Wolford and Chuck Pomatto, encouraged him and Gennie to take the Volunteers In Patrol training and join the neighborhood patrol group. It was also something that he and Gennie could do together. That was two years after the organization was founded and Paul soon became the next president of it. Gennie served as secretary and with her efficient skills created the patrol book that is used to this day.

Is the VIP important to our neighborhood? "I think it's important to know your neighbors, like we did when we were kids, and VIP is a good way to get to know your neighborhood. It also helps the police and, hopefully, deters crime."

Paul feels a strong responsibility to keep his family and his neighborhood safe, and the way to do that is with heaps of good old-fashioned neighborliness. He and Gennie never fail to host the National Night Out for Crime block party. You can see him year after year getting up early to set up tables for the Fourth of July Picnic, then running up and down the street snapping pictures for the neighborhood website during the parade.

You'll also find him at Mass every Sunday greeting and ushering parishioners to their seats at St. Monica's and participating as a Eucharistic Minister. You might find him sorting out the ordering of

jackets for the VIP members, or in his garage as perpetual VIP Equipment Chairperson tinkering with the “Kojak” light wiring keeping it in good repair.

The list of his giving is endless but with characteristic humility he says, “I’m amazed at the other members of VIP like Bob Turney and Bill Marx who are in their eighties and still going strong.”

May Paul live so long and well to hear the same said about him.